

I will admit it. I am a crabby traveler. And I am writing this as I sit for an indefinite delay on my departure to my next location.

I am not proud of being crabby. I am sure that others are not pleased about it either. I am not pleasant to be around in that state, and being in a bad mood causes me more stress than if I were cheerful in the same situation. I believe my irritability is understandable. Delays are more likely than on-time. Flights are ever more crowded and there are fewer non-stop options. And don't get me started on the TSA procedures! I just do not like that lack of control coupled with the unpredictability of air travel.

But I have discovered that being in a bad mood does not help me. Not one single person has ever been nicer to me because I am grouchy. And acting on the outside the way I feel on the inside, makes me feel even worse. Talk about lose-lose!

I have only one reasonable option: If I am feeling bad, I have to *act as if* I am not in a bad mood. I have discovered that if I can just contain my perfectly well-deserved, reasonable, crummy mood, I am better off. Why? Neuroscience can explain. There are two important brain-based principles at work when you act pleasant even though you do not feel it. One is interactive and one is intra-active.

1. Our brains are set up to respond to others with complementary, contingent and congruent faces, which means our facial expressions return to others the face they give us or a face that is in response to their face.
 - If I smile, you will smile back.
 - If I frown you will not offer a pleasant facial expression in return.
 - If I am crying with sadness you might not feel sad, but might (contingently) comfort me.
 - If I look scared you might (congruently) look calm and help to soothe me.
2. The miracle of neural networking contributes to the other brain-based principle. One way memory is efficiently stored for easy retrieval is by emotion. Whatever my emotion, my memory scans for other times I have had a similar feeling and finds the situations that triggered it. In other words, if I get annoyed at the current trip, I am more annoyed remembering every other time security procedures, crowded or late flights or lousy service on a plane interfered with my plans. This principle makes it necessary to deliberately haul my memory out of the negative emotion network if I don't want to dwell there.

In these principles lie the hope to change a bad mood into a better mood, and here is the hope for depression. Depression irritability functions exactly as my travel crabbiness does. When you are depressed, you probably show your bad mood to others who are more likely to leave you alone than try to cheer you up. And, thanks to efficient neural networking that has wired together your similar rotten moments, depression gets worse as one bad mood brings back other bad moods.

There is a brain-based benefit to *acting as if you are feeling ok*. For example, just this week, I qualified for "re-screening" when something in my briefcase needed a closer look. I asked the TSA agent how I could pack differently to prevent the screening on my next trip and he joked, "Well, if you did it right then you would miss out on waiting around here, and you would not hear all of our friendly conversation

and jokes. And I replied with a smile and a laugh and perfect honesty, “Sure, but it is hard for me to generate friendly conversation with steam coming out of my ears.” He laughed very hard at that. He thought I was kidding!

But that little exchange lightened my mood. I smiled and laughed and I did not take myself so seriously then. I was pleased with myself for the restraint to make a joke instead of showing irritability. So, I stayed out of the neural network and boosted my self esteem a tiny notch. Plus, I switched into a neural network of times I have felt pleased with myself. Both the TSA agent and I were better off because I contained my inner irritability and smiled.

You can help your brain to exit networks of unpleasant memory by deliberately switching up what you say and think when you are feeling irritable. Plan to look and speak kindly or pleasantly, even if you cannot muster a happy mood. Smile at others. Thich Nhat Hanh in his precious book *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, talks about the benefits to you of cultivating a half smile: your inner self feels more pleasant as a result of the smile, and others respond more pleasantly to you when you have a pleasant expression on your face.

Despite your depression, it is not fake or phony to smile and be pleasant to others when you feel crummy inside. It is kind and wise. Kindness is an admirable value and you will feel better about yourself for rising above a bad mood. And you will immediately change your brain to a better place, which is very wise. That is a win-win.